

Madhavi Devi

The “Half” Most Intimate



In *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta* (antya 2.104-106), Srila Krishnadas Kaviraj Goswami describes:

*māhitira bhaginī sei, nāma—mādhavī-devī
vṛddhā tapasvinī āra paramā vaiṣṇavī
prabhu lekḥā kare yāre—rādhikāra ‘gaṇa’
jagatera madhye ‘pātra’—sāḍe tina jana
svarūpa gosāñi, āra rāya rāmānanda
śikhi-māhiti—tina, tānra bhaginī—ardha-jana*

Sikhi Mahiti’s sister was named Madhavi Devi. She was an elderly lady who always performed austerities. She was very advanced in devotional service. Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu accepted her as having formerly been an associate of Srimati Radharani. In the entire world, three and a half people were his intimate devotees. Swarup Damodar Goswami, Ramananda Ray, Sikhi Mahiti, and the half a person was Sikhi Mahiti’s sister.

Srila Kavi Karnapur describes Madhavi Devi’s connection with Srimati Radharani in text 189 of his *Gaura-gaṇoddeśa-dīpikā*:

*rāgalekhā-kalākelyau rādhā-dāsyau purā sthite
te jñeye śikhi-māhiti tat-svasā mādhavī-kramāt*

Srimati Radharani’s maidservants, Ragalekha Devi and Kalakeli Devi, appeared as Sikhi Mahiti and his sister Madhavi Devi.

In his purport to Cc. ādi 10.137, His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada mentions that Sikhi Mahiti’s sister, Madhavi Devi, was considered “half” because she was a woman. Apparently this was due to the social stricture that *sannyāsīs* are not allowed to associate with women.

Srila A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada speaks about Madhavi Devi and her two brothers in his purport to Cc. ādi 10.135-136:

Sikhi Mahiti, Madhavi and their brother Murari Mahiti¹ were all unalloyed devotees of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu who could not forget him for a moment of their lives.

Madhavi Dasi was a resident of the village Bentapur, which is situated close to Brahmagiri Alarnath, about 14 miles west of Puri. Bentapur is also the native place of Bhavananda Ray and his famous five sons: Ramananda Ray, Gopinath, Kalanidhi, Sudhanidhi and Vaninath.² Although her father’s name is not given, Madhavi Devi



Sri Sri Radha Gopinath worshiped by Madhavi Devi

is considered to be the daughter of Bhavananda Ray’s brother, which would mean that she was the cousin-sister of Ramananda Ray. Kaviraj Goswami describes her as one of the constant associates of Mahaprabhu.³

Madhavi Devi was said to have been a *karaṇa* by caste⁴ and was appointed the *pāñjiā*, historian or record keeper, of the Puri Jagannath temple chronicle known as *Mādaḷā Pāñjī*.⁵ Her brother Sikhi Mahiti is said to have been in charge of calculating the daily horoscope for Lord Jagannath that is used in the Puri temple. According to Orissan tradition, Madhavi Devi was initiated by Raghava Puri, a disciple of Madhavendra Puri.⁶

Madhavi Devi’s renunciation is famous. While speaking about *sannyāsa* in the line of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, the *Samskāra-dīpikā* mentions Madhavi Devi:⁷

Examples [of renunciates] in Mahaprabhu’s line are his associates Swarup Damodar, who gave up his brahmin thread and *śikhā* and donned a *kaupīna*, thus attaining his natural position (*svarūpa*) as a *sannyāsī*; the *vaiṣṇavī* Madhavi Devi; and Raghunath Das Goswami, who was given *kaupīna* by Nityananda Prabhu himself.

Srimati Madhavi Devi is remembered in connection with the banishment of Chota Haridas. *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* (antya 2.101-103) relates that the devotee Bhagavan Acharya, who was cooking one day for Mahaprabhu, requested Chota Haridas to beg some fine rice from the elderly Madhavi Devi. When Mahaprabhu found out that Chota Haridas, who was in the renounced order of life, had begged the rice from a lady, the Lord rejected him.⁸

Madhavi wrote in Oriya, Bengali and Brajaboli, commonly used languages for the poet followers of Mahaprabhu.⁹ The Orissan scholar Subhas Pani describes Madhavi as the first

lady to write devotional poetry in the Oriya language,¹⁰ while Prabhat Mukherjee has called her “the Mira Bai of Bengali religious songs.”¹¹ A few of Madhavi’s Bengali poems are found in the famous song book *Pada-kalpataru*.¹²

Sri Madhavi Devi established the worship of Sri Sri Radha Gopinath in Bentapur.¹³ The deities are still being worshiped there today. The current *sevak* in charge is named Govardhan Das, and the temple is managed by the Puri Radhakanta Matha, also known as the Gambhira. Madhavi Devi’s *samādhi* is in the corner of the temple compound along with those of some of the former *mahantas* of the temple.

Notes

1 Murari Mahiti is described in Cc. *madhya* 10.44, where it is mentioned that he was introduced to Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu by Sarvabhauma Bhat-tacharya.

2 Cc. *ādi* 10.13.

3 Cc. *ādi* 10.135-136.

4 A prominent caste of administrators and clerks, closely associated with the *ksatriyas*, the ruling caste.

5 Mukherjee, p.126, says that she was appointed to this task by Maharaja Prataparudra.

6 P. Mukherjee, article entitled, “Caitanya in Orissa”. Chapter XVI of *The Cult of Jagannath and the Regional Tradition of Orissa*. Page 315.

7 Text 22. *Saṁskāra-dīpikā* is said to have been written by Srila Gopal Bhatta Goswami. It was printed by Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati who followed its system for the rituals of *saṁnyāsa*.

8 For the complete story and comments on it see Cc. *antya* 3.101-172.

9 See the article “Radha, the Beloved of Jagannath” in this issue.

10 “Hymns to Jagannatha, Madhavidasi”, p. 34.

11 Page 126.

12 Some of the followers of Mahaprabhu’s Oriya *pañca-sakha* associates sometimes say that the complete lack of mention of the *pañca-sakhas* in any of the Bengali biographies of Mahaprabhu indicates some sectarian prejudice on the part of the Gaudiya devotees against the Oriyas. Prabhat Mukherjee makes an interesting point in this regard. He states that there is absolutely no mention of Mahaprabhu’s intimate Oriya devotee Madhavi Devi in any of the literatures of the *pañca-sakhas*. Rather than sectarianism, it is possible that the reason why both groups neglected to mention the other is due to their very different philosophical understandings.

13 There is also a deity on the altar who some say is Lalita and others say is Madhavi Devi.

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